Fostering Broader Use of Participatory Research

Executive Summary

Concept: Promote the increased use of participatory research among a wide range of research organizations (NARS, South Asian and African universities, CGIAR Centres). Standardize the methodologies and the techniques needed to analyze resulting data. Ensure that participatory research data is highly accessible.

Rationale: Participatory research has been used to improve the effectiveness of R & D by providing a critical link to understanding drivers of demand. Feedback from small scale farmers, processors, traders, and consumers about the adoption of new technologies, for instance, can be critical to the direction and focus of R & D. In addition, participatory research often focuses on gender issues, increasing capacity in communities to support women in their access to technology and market opportunities.

If adopted more broadly, participatory research methodologies hold great potential for ensuring that investments in plant breeding, natural resource management, the development of new technologies, etc. are focused on producing goods and services that meet the needs of smallholders. Participatory research methodologies are gaining acceptance international and need to be integrated more widely in agricultural R & D for developing countries. As we begin to understand both their potential impact and their limitations, methodologies need to be shared and best practices developed. As multiple organizations begin to use these methodologies, there is a need for quantitative analysis of the resulting data to be standardized. Results from one organization's participatory research may have broader use and should be both standardized and made easily accessible to all.

This note proposes a four-pronged approach to improve the use of participatory research in agricultural development R & D institutions. First, curriculum is developed and made available either through an on-line course or through the provision of in-class teaching materials. It is proposed that this curriculum be developed using open curriculum development methodology (e.g. WikiBooks) that leverages the collaborative efforts of professionals already teaching participatory research methodologies in agricultural sciences. Second, an on-going series of prizes for participatory research at South Asian and African universities, NARS, and CGIAR centres is proposed to highlight and encourage excellence in this newly emerging field. Third, this note proposes sponsorship of an on-line journal of participatory research that provides publishing opportunities for researchers focused on methodologies, quantitative analysis, and research results of participatory research. Providing academic incentives for publishing will work to rapidly develop the frequency and quality of participatory research in the system. Fourth, an on-line resource is proposed that would be a centralized collection of participatory research data, analysis, etc., making it easily accessible for use by a wide audience.

Expected benefits of the project: Improving the frequency and quality of participatory research projects will align R & D investments with the demands of the intended beneficiaries. Participatory research has the potential to direct multi-year, significant investments in R & D that result in products and services that might otherwise have lower adoption rates adopted or have failed to account for a critical element in consumer demand.

Participatory plant breeding, as one type of participatory research, has the potential to play a key complementary role to other investments in improving seed systems. Better understanding of farmers' needs in variety development couple with increased access to improved varieties and seeds will together work to address the currently low adoption rates.

Sustainability and scale: Many elements of the four-pronged approach here involve initial investment, but not significant on-going investment. Curriculum development, if done in using an "open" methodology, will be relatively inexpensive. The production of materials for teaching, or a website for on-line course offerings, will require a modest investment. Prizes for participatory research projects will take initial investment in design and publicity. Prizes typically, though, provide high profile publicity and good PR for a relatively small payout. Given this, it's likely a sponsor, or a group of sponsors, could be engaged once the initial structure has been worked out. Management of an on-line peer-reviewed journal is an investment that will be ongoing, but could be mitigated by subscriptions. Lastly, the development of a web resource for accessibility of participatory research results will require an initial investment, but not a significant on-going one.

All of the activities proposed have the ability to be easily scaled up, depending on the size of investment and the expected impact.

Measures of success: Measures of success for this project would ultimately be the contribution of participatory research to products and services that are more closely aligned with the needs of smallholders and show higher adoption rates. Immediate measures of success in terms of project deliverables would include: 1.) an increase in the number of participatory research projects and the number of researchers benefiting from the results; 2.) increased adoption of participatory research methodology curriculum into CGIAR, NARS and universities; 3.) submission of articles to the on-line journal and subscriptions to the journal; 4.) significant usage of the web resource sharing participatory research results.

Risks: There are risks that participatory research will not be adopted as widely as anticipated. The use of participatory research requires an organization to add costly elements to the research methodology and if the incentives from donors funding the research and development are not sufficient, participatory research may not be included. Likewise, the adoption of new courses, or including on-line course training for staff requires resources that may not be available. Again, if donors investing in R & D are made aware of the benefits, they can incentivize the increased use of participatory research.